

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

During 2000, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in cooperation with the Children's Bureau of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, both of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), initiated a study of State and county child protective services (CPS) systems and reform efforts. The intent of the study was to describe the current status of the CPS system nationally, including the policies, practices, and procedures which States and communities have developed and implemented to improve CPS systems. The first component of the study was a review of reforms and new directions discussed in the literature.<sup>1</sup> The second component was an analysis of CPS policy in all 50 States and the District of Columbia that focused on organizational and administrative structures and the main CPS functions.<sup>2</sup> The third component was a written survey of 300 randomly selected counties that examined the functions and operational practices that agencies were conducting in response to child maltreatment reports.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth component consisted of site visits to eight local CPS agencies. The purpose of the site visits was to discuss in greater detail the types of reforms that had been implemented in the local agencies. This report presents the findings from the site visits. This chapter summarizes the practice innovations and reform efforts that had been undertaken in the sites. Subsequent chapters present the report of each site visit, in alphabetical order by county name. The reports cover the history or context of the reform, the objectives of the reform, specific CPS policy, practice, and procedural components, the impact of the changes, and plans for the future.

The site visit reports are not representative of all changes being undertaken throughout the country. They are descriptive illustrations of how change has been undertaken with regards to CPS by local agencies. While the site visits were not evaluative, the changes that are discussed have for the most part been found to be beneficial by the local agency staff and the community. Problems and barriers to change are also reported. In some locations the changes and reforms were more systemic than in others, but in all sites, many types of change have been undertaken with the intent of improving the management and provision of CPS.

### SITE SELECTION AND SITE VISIT METHODS

Sites were identified for visits based on their response to the Local Agency Survey (LAS) in which they indicated whether they had implemented significant changes within the prior months. Of those who responded, 81 percent said they had implemented one or more changes. The number of changes ranged from 1 to 15 per site. Sites were assigned a "change weight score" by computing the product of the total number of changes and the number of functional areas with a change. This score represented both the number of changes in an agency and the breadth of the changes. The sites with the largest change scores were considered eligible for visits. Since a

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<sup>1</sup> Available on the Internet at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/protective01/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> The *Review of State CPS Policy* is under review. It will be available on the Internet at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/cps-status03>.

<sup>3</sup> The *Findings on Local CPS Practices* report is under review. It will be available on the Internet at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/cps-status03>.

further selection criterion was that only one site would be visited in each State, the site with the highest score from a State was selected, and the others were dropped from the list. Of the 11 sites selected by this method, 3 could not participate due to scheduling or other types of conflicts.

Eight site visits were made to localities ranging from suburban to rural communities. Three of the sites were in county-administered child welfare systems; five of the sites were in State-administered child welfare systems. The sites were:

- Brooks County, Georgia;
- Butler County, Pennsylvania;
- Catawba County, North Carolina;
- Fairfax County, Virginia;
- La Crosse County, Wisconsin;
- Ventura County, California;
- Union County, Florida; and
- Utah County, Utah.

The objective of the site visits was to gain a deeper understanding of the changes in CPS practice being undertaken. Activities included interviewing key stakeholders in the CPS system and obtaining documentation of the reform efforts underway. Sites were asked specifically to discuss the changes that had been indicated in their LAS response and to identify any other changes that were related to conducting CPS. Interviews were held with individuals and focus groups. The scope of the interviews was focused on CPS rather than on the broader sphere of child welfare responsibilities. Examples of change in the following areas are summarized in this chapter.

- Organization and administration of CPS;
- Investigation and assessment functions;
- Improvements in working with families;
- Community collaborations;
- Attention to domestic violence;
- Addressing substance abuse; and
- Accountability.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGES**

Several of the site visits provided detailed information on specific changes related to philosophy of service, organizational and functional structuring of work, training, and staffing. Some of these changes have affected the operations of the entire agency, while others have had more limited impact.

Many agencies reported having undertaken broad-based changes regarding their philosophy of service. For example, Fairfax County, Virginia, Utah County, Utah, and Ventura County, California, implemented changes to the overall philosophy of their programs to emphasize the provision of family-focused and family-friendly approaches to services.

Specific changes to the screening function were noted for Ventura County, California, which had contracted with a private agency to conduct screening. In La Crosse County, Wisconsin, paraprofessional screeners received primary referral information; casework supervisors reviewed the information and made the decision to investigate or not. Staff in Butler County, Pennsylvania, also addressed screening by implementing a specialized screening unit in order to help improve the consistency of screening decisions rather than having this function performed by the staff who also conducted investigations.

Additional specialization of functions was reported by Butler County, Pennsylvania, and Union County, Florida. In Butler County, Pennsylvania, a single, dedicated investigator handled all sexual abuse cases, which was thought to be critical because of the special expertise needed for these types of cases. The dedicated investigator also became part of a joint police and CPS investigative team. Similarly, the Union County, Florida, agency recently separated its generic CPS units into investigative and ongoing services units.

Other types of specialized staffing changes included those undertaken by Catawba County Department of Social Services, North Carolina, Ventura County, California, and Fairfax County, Virginia. Catawba County created a half-time position for a family group conferencing coordinator; Ventura County reformulated its use of public health nurses who were part of the investigation units to re-emphasize their roles as nurses rather than acting as CPS investigators. Fairfax County planned to create a child custody intervention team to reduce the amount of time spent on allegations that were part of child custody cases.

In some sites, there was a different direction of change. Fairfax County, Virginia, integrated investigation and ongoing support functions. Staff members served on a team to improve continuity between intake and ongoing services. Further, these combined services units were moved into satellite offices in order to better meet community and family needs. Similarly, La Crosse County, Wisconsin, decided to make all CPS workers generic workers who would share responsibility for intake, investigation, and case management. Many agencies commented on the need for new training for workers as change has been implemented.

## **INVESTIGATION AND ASSESSMENT FUNCTIONS**

The response to an allegation of abuse and neglect has always been the responsibility of CPS. Two major directions of change were noted during the site visits, as well as a number of additional changes. These involved the role of law enforcement in investigations and the creation of an alternate response to investigation.

### **Joint CPS and Law Enforcement Investigations**

Law enforcement—whether police departments, sheriff offices, or the District Attorney’s office—has long had a role in collecting evidence to prosecute perpetrators and, in some jurisdictions, in reaching decisions about removal of children from the home. As the evidentiary requirements have grown, CPS practice has found the need to clarify roles and reduce duplication of responsibilities that the roles of the social services agencies and the law enforcement agencies can be complementary rather than competitive. Some jurisdictions have moved to joint CPS and law enforcement investigations to allow social workers to spend less

time on investigation and more time on establishing a relationship with the nonoffending caretaker and the rest of the family.

In Brooks County, Georgia, the District Attorney's office, three law enforcement agencies, CPS, and numerous other agencies worked together to revise the interagency child abuse protocol, which clarified the role of CPS workers and law enforcement and established a multidisciplinary team for case review. Some of the results, according to those interviewed, included better decisionmaking by caseworkers about how to proceed on a case as well as reduced revictimization of children. Butler County, Pennsylvania, also established protocols for joint police and CPS investigations, to clarify roles and responsibilities. Catawba County, North Carolina, colocated law enforcement and CPS staff in an effort to ensure ongoing cooperation in cases of child sexual abuse and extreme physical abuse.

Upon an allegation of serious physical abuse, sexual abuse, or a child fatality in Union County, Florida, law enforcement personnel from the sheriff's office accompanied caseworkers from the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to investigate. If law enforcement and DCF were not conducting joint investigations, information was shared. For example, if the county sheriff determined that a child was not in "serious" danger, the DCF investigator would conduct the investigation and submit a report to the sheriff's office. The sheriff's office would rely on the DCF worker's judgment. DCF workers stated that joint investigations ensured the protection of endangered children and the safety of the worker.

### **Alternative Response**

The diversification of responses to an allegation of maltreatment is a trend that is gaining attention throughout the country. In one site, this practice was a recent innovation. Fairfax County, Virginia, recently implemented a Differential Response System (DRS). With this system, if a child was not found to be in immediate danger, a family assessment would be used to identify family needs and provide immediate services built on family strengths. Under the DRS, reports alleging child abuse or neglect were assessed to determine whether they deserved an investigation or a family assessment response. Family assessment responses differed from investigations in that they did not require a determination of maltreatment or the same level of due process procedures, and were not recorded on the State Central Registry.

### **Additional Changes**

Several sites reported that they had implemented the use of safety or risk assessment tools to assist workers in assessing immediate danger to the child. La Crosse County, Wisconsin, specifically described the implementation of new safety and risk assessment procedures.

The use of multidisciplinary teams—often an outgrowth of joint police and CPS investigations—was also observed. Brooks County, Georgia, used such teams during investigations.

## **CHANGES IN WORKING WITH FAMILIES**

The family-centered philosophy, which follows a referral for services, has resulted in practice that seeks to empower families and help them recognize and build on their strengths. It also includes meeting extended family members and making families partners in permanency

planning. Several sites had implemented some form of family conferencing or family group decisionmaking.

Catawba County, North Carolina, used two family group conferencing models to facilitate planning and decisions about a range of family needs to address child safety. In Fairfax County, Virginia, family assessments were used to engage families in cooperative efforts to find solutions to the problems for which they were reported. In Ventura County, California, the family decisionmaking process brought families, friends, and service providers together to make decisions to ensure the safety and well-being of the children. Utah County, Utah, worked to engage families and build on their strengths through many family-oriented practices.

## **COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS**

Community partnerships to serve families when a child has been or is at risk of being abused or neglected have resulted from a range of cooperative service arrangements. Many efforts are underway to include a wide range of service providers in meeting the needs of children and families.

One-half of the sites had established some type of community partnership to serve children and families. In Butler County, Pennsylvania, the Community Service Review Team included approximately 25 people who reviewed difficult cases on a monthly basis and helped to provide a continuum of services. La Crosse County, Wisconsin, developed a Family and Children's Collaborative, which was exploring the development of a group to deal with case management and coordination among all service providers.

Two sites discussed improved relationships with the courts as a result of the involvement of a Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) for each child. Butler County, Pennsylvania, hired GALs as staff to advocate for the best interests of the child before meeting the child in court. In Union County, Florida, the court appointed a volunteer GAL when the dependency case came to court. While not part of the agency, the GAL had contact with the child once each month and would attend all agency staffing meetings, court events, and mediation sessions.

Union County, Florida, has been significantly affected by statewide initiatives to privatize services. Many service providers have become involved. Examples include the Nurturing Program, which provided parenting education and intensive home visits. This program was for low-risk families. In addition, private programs in Union County, Florida, provided targeted mental health services and behavioral health care, including substance abuse programs and psychological assessments.

In Ventura County, California, extensive collaborations were also underway. The organization with which the Human Services Agency contracted for screening services also provided other services to children and families, such as child abuse intervention and prevention, family life education, family support, and court appointed special advocates. The agency was also implementing a support group program to provide direct feedback regarding agency programs and operations from a group of current and former clients.

The Fairfax County, Virginia, agency made extensive efforts to involve community residents in solving problems of children and families. After relocating throughout the county, multi-agency teams discussed community outreach and began to develop connections with other agencies, community groups, and residents.

## **ATTENTION TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

One-half of the sites worked with domestic violence programs, reflecting widespread interest in improving the coordination of CPS in domestic violence situations. In Brooks County, Georgia, workers from DFCS would accompany police on domestic violence investigations since Georgia has defined witnessing violence as a form of child abuse. By increasing the coordination with the local victims assistance program in serving children, it was reported that more CPS staff time would be available to work on other cases.

In Catawba County, North Carolina, if domestic violence appeared to be a factor, the CPS worker would develop safety plans for both the victim and the child. This included referring them to “First Step,” which provided shelter and treatment. If, however, the risk to the child was high and the parent could not or would not cooperate, or if the situation was not improved after 6 months of services, the Department would file a petition requesting custody of the child.

The Department of Children and Families in Union County, Florida, had an interagency agreement with a local domestic violence program, through which there was a mutual commitment to share information and clients, as necessary, to protect children and the nonoffending parent.

La Crosse County, Wisconsin, initiated a process to improve cooperation between CPS and domestic violence programs. A workgroup developed a document recommending the creation of training for domestic violence staff on the CPS system; development of a memorandum of understanding between the two agencies; and revisions to CPS investigation standards.

## **ADDRESSING SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

The impact of substance abusing parents upon children has been documented.<sup>4</sup> Because of this concern, some sites discussed changes that they were undertaking, particularly in working with Drug Courts and substance abuse treatment agencies.

In Ventura County, California, the Drug Court provided mothers and infants identified with positive toxicology prenatally or at birth with an average of 6 months inpatient treatment and supervision to help them maintain their families without the need for placement. The residential settings were facilities that supported both the mother and her infant. This process has been monitored intensively by the court, and the child would be placed if the mother was unable to complete the program successfully. In addition, an interagency case management council met weekly to assure that children and families received services to prevent removal or to speed reunification.

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<sup>4</sup> U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. (April 1999). *Blending Perspectives and Building Common Ground: A Report to Congress on Substance Abuse and Child Protection*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

Union County, Florida, also used a Drug Dependency Court program when a dependency petition had been filed, in part, because the caregiver was a substance abuser. The initial, intensive stage of the program took 90–120 days and required participation of a minimum of 4 times per day, 4 times per week in treatment groups and drug testing. In addition to the substance abuse treatment, parents could attend parenting classes, anger management, and other services. The court maintained vigilant supervision of the caregiver’s progress towards sobriety. Thus if the caregiver was not compliant or did not make progress, it was likely that parental rights would be terminated more quickly.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY**

In concert with the trend towards improving family relations with the CPS agency and extending CPS into the community, there was some evidence of increased attention to accountability. The increased attention to performance by local, State, and Federal agencies contributed to this trend.

Florida has instituted numerous reporting and practice requirements through legislation, which was designed to increase accountability. In addition, the Department of Children and Families tested a computerized case record system, which included case-level information for all reports of maltreatment. In Union County, Florida, caseworkers and supervisors could review the status of any case in the system. The system also allowed documentation of actions taken by other service providers who would be held accountable if they did not provide needed services in a timely manner.

California implemented its Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System within the past 3 years. The Ventura County, California, agency, through its collaborative with the county’s Information Technology (IT) department, prepared monthly management performance reports and responded to the needs of management for other data. These reports have become a part of the monitoring process the County uses to monitor specific performance goals, such as reducing the numbers of reports that are screened out.

## **SUMMARY OF REFORM TRENDS**

Site visits to local jurisdictions that were reforming their CPS systems identified several trends. Table 1–1, Summary of Site Reforms, provides a graphic summary of the main areas of change.

Understanding the impact of such changes on outcomes will require further evaluation. Many of the innovations are too young to be evaluated; others have not been evaluated for various reasons. In instances where changes are in different directions, it would be useful to have more systemic analysis of the impact of such reforms. For example, the relative merits of specialized versus generic staff providing CPS functions have been debated among CPS practitioners and managers since the inception of CPS, but have not been seriously evaluated.

**Table 1–1: Summary of Site Reforms**

County	Organizational and Administrative	Joint CPS and Law Enforcement Investigations	Alternative Response and Other Approaches	Changes in Working with Families	Community Collaborations	Attention to Domestic Violence	Addressing Substance Abuse
Brooks, GA		√	√			√	
Butler, PA	√	√			√	√	
Catawba, NC	√	√		√		√	
Fairfax, VA	√		√	√	√		
La Crosse, WI	√		√		√	√	
Ventura, CA	√			√	√		√
Union, FL	√	√			√	√	√
Utah, UT	√			√			

It is possible, however, to identify some impacts on the child welfare organization. Ventura County, California, for example, reduced turnover of line staff from 20 percent to 4 percent over a 2-year period. Those interviewed attributed this to better pay, ongoing training, support for workers in providing input to management, alternative work schedules, opportunities for advancement, and other factors.

Training and cross-training, when collaborations are involved, were reported to help sustain reform efforts because training helped staff to understand their roles and responsibilities, as well as the goals of the reform efforts. Better pay was also cited as an assist in sustaining change—although it is not clear that it is sufficient without additional training. Ongoing support for workers was also reported to boost staff morale and commitment.

States and localities are motivated by several issues to reform CPS. States and localities are also being held more accountable for the interests of the community and to achieve desired outcomes for children. The Adoption and Safe Families Act requires States to move children through the system more rapidly to achieve permanency. At the same time, in some agencies caseloads are rising and many practitioners report that the number of cases with severely dysfunctional families continues to remain exceedingly high.